

Terence, tender prostitutes, and kind mothers-in-law

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Theatre goes Greek to become Roman

In April 163 B.C., at the Megalesian Games celebrated in Rome in honour of the Great Mother Goddess Cybele, Lucius Ambivius Turpio, leading actor and producer of the comedies of the playwright Terence (195–159 B.C.), appeared on stage and announced:

Today I am going to perform a fresh comedy taken from a fresh Greek play – The Self-Tormentor.

Turpio boasts that this is not an original play, that Terence had based it on a Greek comedy, of the same title, by the Hellenistic playwright Menander. A large part of the Roman audience's appreciation of the comedy stemmed precisely from the fact that it was an adaptation of a Greek play.

Playwrights had taken over Greek literary works and 'translated' them into Latin for Italian audiences at least since the middle of the third century B.C., when the half-Greek freedman Livius Andronicus rendered into Latin Homer's *Odyssey* and plays of the Athenian classical period. By Terence's time it was culturally fashionable and socially important for Romans to demonstrate that they could engage creatively and competitively with Greek civilization both in literature and in visual culture.

Supporters of old-fashioned Roman ideals expressed strong reservations about the influence of Greek culture, which threatened to overwhelm native 'Roman-ness'. Nevertheless, the presence of 'things Greek' in the public and private spheres in Rome and Italy was not only clearly felt but also actively promoted by some members of the Roman aristocracy. They used the culture of the conquered people to re-invent and re-shape Roman national identity.

It is the plays of Terence that best reveal how Roman theatrical culture was turned Greek. Terence largely abandoned the verbal fireworks and the slapstick visual humour of his predecessor Plautus (c. 254–184 B.C.). Terence was said to have been patronized by powerful supporters of Greek culture and on the face of it he 'translates' his Greek originals much more

Roman audiences, when they went to see comedies, had set expectations. But Costas Panayotakis argues here that the great second-century B.C. comic playwright Terence deliberately disappointed those expectations. Although the audience come imagining that the prostitutes will be greedy and callous, and the mothers-in-law evil, they turn out to be tender and kind. These unexpected characters are one way in which Terence encourages his audience to perceive his Latin versions of Greek plays to be superior to those of his predecessors.

faithfully than Plautus did. If we look more closely, however, we can see that Terence followed Greek aesthetic preferences not slavishly but in an original way.

What the Roman audience expected

Terence composed plays that belonged to the type of popular theatre which acquired the generic label 'Latin drama in Greek clothing' (*fabula palliata*). This featured stock characters, stereotyped plots, and comic routines. Although Terence adopts these and other conventions of the genre, he avoids reproducing them in a mechanical and typecast manner. So in the prologue to *The Self-Tormentor* Turpio asks:

Pay attention; be fair; give me a chance; let me be allowed to act a quiet play without interruption, so that I don't always constantly have to play the running slave, the angry old man, the gluttonous parasite, the shameless swindler, and the grasping pimp.

Turpio's conventional plea for silence in an open-air theatre is given particular force by what had happened to Terence's previous play *The Mother-in-Law*; the first performance of this play in 165 B.C. was cancelled, because, according to the prologue, 'the foolish, fanatical public had become engrossed in a tightrope walker'. But Turpio's request for audience-concentration includes also Terence's wish to be allowed to experiment with generic norms and to play with audience expectations.

The portrayal of the cunning slave Syrus in *The Self-Tormentor* is a good example of Terence's unconventional

approach to stock motifs and predictable characters. Syrus plans to secure the erotic services of the greedy prostitute Bacchis for his young master Clitipho. Syrus intends to do this not by lying but by telling the truth, which in this case will be reckoned a lie. He boasts that this is his best plan so far:

Well, I award first prize to this plan of mine; it makes me hold my head up and walk proud that I possess so much power, that I'm so capable and clever, that I can trick them both by telling the truth!

Here Terence cleverly makes a double point: he relies on the familiarity of the audience with the stereotype of the scheming slave. The success of many intrigues in Roman comedy depends on lies, deceit, and the manipulation of truth; clever plots are engineered by ever-resourceful household-slaves, who assist their hopeless young masters in ways which violate the authority of their fathers, the old masters. But in this case Terence has Syrus turn this convention on its head by using truth-telling as a tool for deception. Syrus is conscious of concocting a plan worthy of the first prize in a competition for composing comedy, and portrays himself as a literary judge, awarding himself a trophy for his ingenuity. Syrus here speaks for Terence, who congratulates himself on his theatrical achievement: the slave's scheme is so clever and so unusual that it is viewed as itself a hallmark of successful comedy. Terence's unconventional treatment of truth and lies within the fictional world of the play entertains the Roman audience, because it surprises it, and it suggests that Terence wanted his

viewers to perceive his 'Latin comedies in Greek clothing' as more sophisticated than those of his pre-decessors.

Terence's statements on how to compose good comedy turn out to be deliberately misleading. In Terence's *The Eunuch*, a hugely successful play performed two years after *The Self-Tormentor* at the Megalesian Games in Rome, the speaker of the prologue comes on and says:

And if he's not allowed to use the same characters as someone else has used, how is it more allowable to show a running slave, to make his mothers good and his prostitutes bad, to write about a baby fraudulently substituted, the deception of an old man by a slave, love, hate, suspicion?

In the lines preceding this passage, the speaker tells us that Terence had been accused of violating the 'rules' of Latin adaptation of Greek plays, because he apparently incorporated into his comedy two stock characters (the parasite and the soldier) from another Roman comedy, not from a Greek play. The speaker, while dealing with this charge, claims that the playwright is entirely traditional in his approach to stereotypical characters: in Roman comedy the convention is that mothers are good, prostitutes are bad, old men are gullible, slaves are deceitful, and so on. The implication is that Terence draws characters and themes for his plays from the stock repertory of Hellenistic Greek comedy. But is this true?

The prostitute and the mother-in-law

What we find is that Terence regularly overturns character stereotypes. Consider his prostitutes Bacchis in *The Mother-in-Law* and Thais in *The Eunuch*. Although Bacchis appears only near the end of the play, her character dominates the opening remarks of the slave Parmeno, who paints an unsympathetic portrait of her, in line with Roman expectations. However, when Bacchis appears and is allowed to speak for herself, she shows that she is a tender, unselfish, loving, and devoted mistress, who wants what is best for Pamphilus, her former lover:

I am glad that all these joys have come to him thanks to me, even if other prostitutes don't want that – after all it's not in our interests for any lover to enjoy the pleasure of a marriage. But I shall certainly never bring myself to play a wicked part for the sake of profit.

The uncharacteristic decency of Bacchis was noted in antiquity by Donatus who wrote commentaries on Terence's plays in the fourth century A.D. It is very likely that

it took the Roman audience by surprise when *The Mother-in-Law* was eventually performed in 160 B.C.

A second example of the loving prostitute is Thais in *The Eunuch*. Like Bacchis, Thais is not favoured by the slave Parmeno, who suspects her motives; she really loves the young man Phaedria, and when she is left on her own she delivers a sincere soliloquy, which includes a statement on her unusual personality:

Oh dear, perhaps he doesn't really trust me and is judging me from other women's characters. I know what I'm doing and I certainly know this for a fact, that I haven't made up any lies, and that no one is dearer to my heart than this man Phaedria.

A similar reversal of audience expectations comes in the mother-in-law Sostrata in *The Mother-in-Law*. Sostrata has been wrongly accused by her narrow-minded husband Laches of forcing with her rude behaviour their daughter-in-law Philumena to flee from her husband's home and return to her parental residence. In her defence she claims:

Well, it's just not fair! Our husbands hate all of us equally because of a few women who make it look as if we all deserve to be punished. As for what my husband's accusing me of now, I swear I'm innocent. But it's not easy to clear myself, because they're convinced that all mothers-in-law are unkind. Well, I'm certainly not!

Terence: the prostitute with the heart of gold?

The assertions of Bacchis, Thais, and Sostrata may be viewed as claims about their individual characters which set them apart from mercenary courtesans and vindictive mothers-in-law. However, we might see them also as authorial statements on character-portrayal, which aim at setting Terence apart from Plautus and other Roman playwrights who (in Terence's opinion) were not subtle enough in their 'translations' of Greek comedy into Latin. This does not mean that Terence entirely lacks elements of Plautine farcical humour. The prostitute, again named Bacchis, in *The Self-Tormentor* is greedy and one-dimensional. But it looks as if Terence was developing an aversion to these stereotypes. His variations on characters and his reversal of audience-expectations are certainly intended to surprise us comically, but they may also amount to seriously expressed artistic views; their aim was to change the nature of 'Latin comedies in Greek clothing'.

The translations of passages from Terence's plays have been cited from *Terence: The Comedies. Translated with Introduction and Notes* by Peter Brown (Oxford, 2006).

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